







# MONSTERS BRAWL

WITH THE TITULAR VAMPIRE SLAYER OUT FOR THE COUNT... AND THE WOLF MAN, AND FRANKENSTEIN'S CREATURE, *VAN HELSING* IS STAKING ITS CLAIM AS THE YEAR'S ULTIMATE BLOCK-BUSTING BEAST.

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT





High in the rocky crags of the Carpathian Mountains, hemmed in by dark, Gothic wooden huts studded with crosses and hooded windows, fake snow partially covering the muddy ground, *Empire* surveys a desolate and disquieting place. We tiptoe into a tiny, ramshackle graveyard, carefully picking our way through the tombstones, before noticing a conspicuously open grave nestling under the light of a gibbous moon. It's a neat Sergio Leone tribute, a grave intended for Van Helsing, who's come to this village, adjacent to Castle Dracula, to save it from the rampages of the Count's blood-thirsty Brides. The villagers don't think he'll last long. A \$US150 million budget and a franchise in the making, however, say otherwise.

In spite of the chill Prague air and unsettling surroundings, there's a buzz of excitement running through the set of *Van Helsing*. It's no surprise – few can deny the appeal of this high-concept, high-budget action horror, in which Hugh Jackman's Vatican-sponsored monster mashing machine teams up with vengeful vampire killer Anna Valerious (Kate Beckinsale) to stop Dracula (Richard Roxburgh) from propagating his species via the power inherent in Frankenstein's Monster (Shuler Hensley) and The Wolf Man (Will Kemp). As extras, clad in suitable Carpathian peasant garb, hang around waiting for their call to arms, the excitement levels rise to near-critical as our hero strides on-set. Everyone, but *everyone*, slips into gawk mode, and small wonder – in his *Van Helsing* clobber, Jackman is an imposing sight: tall, athletic and purposeful. Clad in a heavy-duty brown full-length leather coat, shoulder-length hair extensions, and a crossbow so clunky that Peter Cushing would have broken his arms trying to lift it, this is the 21st century's *Van Helsing*. In a year chock-a-block with potential

known, however, is that director Bryan Singer was initially dead set against the ebullient Aussie, mainly because he was, at that time, playing Curly in the British National Theatre's production of *Oklahoma!* and Singer couldn't imagine the tousle-haired cowboy as a feral force of nature. But, ironically, it was that self-same role that set Jackman on the road to vampire slaying... "I saw him in *Oklahoma!*," says Sommers's long-time producer-editor Bob Ducsay. "That was the first moment I ever saw Hugh and he had so much charisma and so much strength. When the picture was being developed, even before there was a screenplay, Hugh Jackman was who we wanted."

The feeling was mutual. After *X2*'s ensemble experience, Jackman was ready for his first above-the-title gig. "I'll live or die by the sword on this one," he laughs, fiddling with that enormous crossbow. "But I was very happy to do that for Steve. From the moment I read it I thought it was such a great story; Steve is a great storyteller. On paper it sounds fun, but I think people will be surprised when they see the movie, when they see what's involved, when they see how he's weaved all the elements together."

IN THE PAST, *EMPIRE* HASN'T BEEN A FULLY PAID-UP member of the Stephen Sommers Appreciation Society.

"THE FIRST MOMENT I SAW HUGH, HE HAD SUCH CHARISMA AND STRENGTH. EVEN BEFORE THERE WAS A SCRIPT, HUGH WAS WHO WE WANTED."

STEPHEN SOMMERS

*Deep Rising*, *The Mummy* and *The Mummy Returns* are hardly works of unqualified genius, but, with *Van Helsing*, the 42-year-old director is staking a claim for a place in the annals of movie history. The concept of uniting three of horror's biggest icons as a tag team of total terror is one of those priceless "Why didn't I think of that?" conceits; simple yet brilliant, the in-built

nostalgia likely to generate huge audience interest.

And any fears that Sommers would bring much the same tone and visual sense to *Van Helsing* as he did to the bright, colourful, and tongue-in-cheek *Mummy* movies are quickly assuaged. Dracula is a vast winged creature, the Wolf Man a savage steroidal brute and *Van Helsing* himself, a shady figure with strong gunslinger overtones, looks dark, moody and brutal. The feel is tonally perfect, but how did Sommers resurrect these timeworn characters, revamping concepts that have been bled almost dry?

"I went away for a while and I thought, is it possible?" admits Sommers, who has littered the movie with references to the classic Universal horrors of the 1930s and 1940s (the prologue is shot in black and white). "I went off and wrote it on spec by myself because I didn't know if I could write the script. I didn't want to do *Van Helsing* picking off the big three monsters, that's so predictable. So I went back and watched the original movies, and the *Bride Of Frankenstein*, and I fell in love again with those characters."

For the director, there was much more depth to these characters than many casual observers might think. The Werewolf, he asserts, is not simply a hideous beast out to slay people. "People nowadays who don't know these movies think, oh, the Werewolf is just a bad guy who kills people," he continues. "Well no, actually, he can be a really noble, intelligent man who's like an alcoholic or a drug addict. And I loved playing with that. Same with Frankenstein – in the original, in the book, he's more like the Elephant >>



Lockjaw: painful.

action gods duking it out – Brad Pitt in *Troy*, Jude Law in *Sky Captain And The World Of Tomorrow*, Tobey Maguire in *Spider-Man 2* – Jackman is making an early play to be the undisputed title holder.

"I needed a real man," says director Stephen Sommers, watching the reaction to his handsome hero. "A guy whom we felt was worldly. That's one thing I liked about Peter Cushing or Anthony Hopkins. They're worldly. I needed that but he doesn't have to be 50 or 60..."

That Hugh Jackman was cast as Wolverine six weeks into the shooting of the original *X-Men* (2000), after Dougray Scott dropped out, has passed into Tinseltown legend. What's less well



Suddenly, the *Moulin Rouge* set turned very, very sexy.





# MESSING WITH THESE GUYS WILL HAVE YOU IN STITCHES!



Starring **DAVID WENHAM** (LORD OF THE RINGS), **SAM WORTHINGTON** (DIRTY DEEDS), **FREYA STAFFORD** (TV's WHITE COLLAR BLUE), **GARY SWEET** (THE TRACKER) and **TIMOTHY SPALL** (THE LAST SAMURAI), the "slick and effortlessly stylish"\* **Aussie box office comedy hit GETTIN' SQUARE**, now on DVD, takes you on an enjoyable ride through Australia's dark underbelly of crime and corruption.

## ● CRITICAL ACCLAIM:

- Winner of an AFI Award (Best Actor in a leading role - DAVID WENHAM) and 5 IF Awards
- "...a feel good combination of suspense and laughs distinguished by superb performances." - *VARIETY*
- "Funny and surprising...Teplitzky's cool, sophisticated style of filmmaking again works well for this Down Under **PULP FICTION**." - *COURIER MAIL*
- "Hilarious... a sheer joy" - *ADRIAN MARTIN, THE AGE*

## ● COLLECTOR'S EDITION DVD SPECIAL FEATURES:

- Audio commentary by the director and writer, never-before-seen deleted scenes, 'Shady Speak' - learn the language of the crim, cast and crew interviews and much, much more...

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BOLD-CTH234/EMPIRE





Man, scary on the outside, but there's something on the inside. So I thought there was more to that. Same with Dracula – he's not just about sucking blood. He's the ultimate vampire. You just can't kill him like you'd kill any other vampire. What if no one knew how to kill Dracula? If it's just a silver stake, how hard is that? Van Helsing's a badass! He'd just come up and stick him with the stake, and that's it! But he does that and it doesn't work. You've got to stick to the rules and the mythology, but you gotta have fun with it, otherwise people are going to get bored."

With the already formidable creatures undergoing significant makeovers in the CG and mythological departments, it was clear that Sommers needed a powerful, charismatic hero to match them. Rather than creating a brand new character, though, he dipped back into Stoker's bloody inkwell and retrieved Van Helsing, Count Dracula's arch nemesis. Almost

40 different people have played this mercurial vampire killer over the past eight decades, including Peter Cushing, Anthony Hopkins and Laurence Olivier, each of them playing a stoic man of letters, a grim vanquisher of evil, and – frankly – a dodderly old codger. So, as Sommers honed his hero, out went Stoker's scholar and in came a supernaturally inclined superhero. Thirty years were shaved off (although he remains Dutch), and a name change was in order, too. Goodbye, Abraham, hello Gabriel...

"Right off the top, I knew I didn't like the name Abraham," muses Sommers. "I just don't like it. I couldn't name my lead guy Abraham. There's a reason why he's called Gabriel as well. We've got a different story to tell here. He can be very worldly but he can also kick ass when ass-kicking is necessary. And he gets his ass kicked a fair amount too. But then he's up against the baddest of the bad."

Luckily, to defend himself from these bad, bad boys, Van Helsing's packing more gadgets than Q Branch, including that eponymous crossbow, flying crucifixes and a spinning razor-edged disc straight out of that fantasy relic *Krull*. "I'm a little like one of those New York street watch salesmen," laughs

Jackman. "I think we're up to about 15 things. Steve's one of those writers and directors who've got three million ideas and they're all going at once. So when it came to weapons it shows great restraint for him to keep it down to just 15."

There are elements of Wolverine about Stephen Sommers's Bram Stoker's Hugh Jackman's Van Helsing. Both have a slight long-term memory problem, anger management

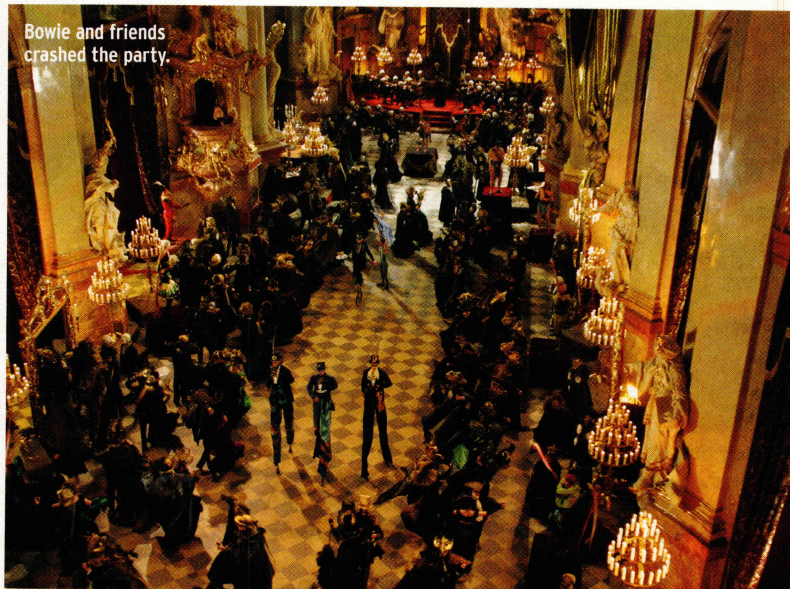
issues, and both are trained killers – Van Helsing in this case is ordered by the Vatican to hunt down and destroy evil spirits. "And he's becoming increasingly unhappy about it because his reputation is becoming bigger and bigger and his enemies are "

"I'LL LIVE OR DIE  
BY THE SWORD  
ON VAN HELSING,  
BUT I'M HAPPY  
TO DO THAT."  
HUGH JACKMAN

Above: Stitch that – the Frankenstein Monster (Shuler Hensley) goes on the rampage. Below: My aim is true – Hugh Jackman's Van Helsing shows off his shooting skills.







Bowie and friends crashed the party.



Stevie Nicks - old

becoming greater and greater and he's still not really sure why he's doing it," reveals an earnest Jackman. "And in any kind of exorcism, it's a double-edged sword to killing a possessed soul because you kill the repressed soul at the same time. That's the thing I wanted to play with. It's one thing to be very James Bond about it and kill, say, Dr Jekyll or whomever, but once they transform, ultimately in success you have failed because the soul is already lost."

It's a major sea change from the relatively light heroes of Sommers's previous flicks. "Oh yeah. His curse in life is his job," agrees Sommers. "He has to vanquish evil and he's got a lot more baggage on him. I never put this much baggage on a hero before..."

LOS ANGELES, FEBRUARY 2004. *EMPIRE* IS SITTING opposite Stephen Sommers in his very plush Santa Monica office. With less than two months until the film is finished, he should be bald or grey and smoking 60-a-day. But he's none of the above. In fact, he's got a healthy mane and looks totally calm, but as a

"VAN HELSING'S CURSE IN HIS LIFE IS HIS JOB. HE'S GOT A LOT OF BAGGAGE." STEPHEN SOMMERS

movie about a giant bat masquerading in human form should tell you, appearances can be deceptive.

"Hell yeah, I feel pressure! Are you crazy?" he laughs. "Everybody who knows me knows that nobody puts more pressure on me than I do. I'm not a screamer. I'm like a split personality. It looks like I'm having a blast but inside I'm just tearing and ripping myself up. Inside, with every scene I'm just eating myself up because every single moment, every single shot, every single performance has got to be *great great great*. And that's the pressure I put on myself. People will come up to me and say 'you look like the happiest person in the world' and Bob Ducsay is like 'oh no, he's not. He's dying'."

That pressure isn't surprising – there's a helluva lot riding on *Van Helsing*'s success. From the moment the project was first announced at the very beginning of 2002, there was no doubt that Universal was pinning its winter, 2004, hopes on the movie. It quickly bagged a release date in the first week of May, which has served *Spider-Man*, *X2*, and – yes – *The Mummy Returns* so well in recent years. The concept has proved an incredibly easy sell – with Jackman's burgeoning star power, and Sommers himself, whose last two movies may have pissed off vituperative critics, but still raked in close to a billion US dollars worldwide – and there's little doubt that the 41-year-old Minnesotan is regarded by many as one of the premier purveyors of pure popcorn cinema, a director who places an unashamed emphasis on fun. Yet, there's a nagging feeling that he may be hanging on for dear life to a winning Lotto ticket...

"I wanted to move on. I didn't want to make *Mummy 3*. No offence," he insists. "I had to do something different now. And that something ended up being *Van Helsing*." *Van Helsing* is noticeably darker than Sommers's previous sojourns into filmmaking – it's grittier, potentially scarier, more violent and with a decidedly downbeat lighting and colour scheme – but it could be argued that it's just a darker spin on the *Mummy* formula, which took an old Universal horror stalwart, dusted it down, gave it a CG oil change, and sent it on its merry way.

And for a man whose last film was nearly derailed by one of the worst CG effects in history – the Game Boy reject that was the Scorpion King in *The Mummy Returns* – Sommers has crammed *Van Helsing* with more Industrial Light & Magic CG than a George Lucas wet dream. Still, this is the digital age, and Sommers doesn't – probably can't – think small. "We have 980 shots and they all fall into different categories," he smiles. "We have a lot of completely CG creatures running around, more than I've ever done, or most people have ever done. And hopefully it's all real. It's frustrating initially when you're watching a grey guy, a grey clay model going through the moves and it just looks like hell. »



Van-the-man sinks his teeth into the role.



"And for month after month you're just watching this and thinking, God, is it ever going to come off? and slowly but surely it goes from being okay to brilliant. It's that last 10-20 per cent that takes it from where it's looking really good to suddenly 'Holy shit! Look at that!' So that's where we're at right now, there's a lot of 'Holy shits!' going on." And he's unconcerned about a *Scorpion King* repeat. "They're still trying to make up for that now!" he laughs. "No, but going into this we knew that all the tough stuff, the three-dimensional creatures, we'd seen that months ago and we were in great shape. But we're going to be right down to the wire."

BACK AMONG THE GOTHIC BUILDINGS IN THE BLEAK midwinter, the twisted ramshackle buildings reaching for the sky with their hooded rooftops, it becomes apparent that Sommers has a propensity for imagining weird and funky stuff faster than Universal's bean counters can write cheques. So when this horror-actioner rips into theatres, expect plenty of the following: enormous sets (catacombs filled with gallons of murky water, the cavernous chambers of Castle Dracula); hordes of CG vampires (including a startling transformation for Dracula as he goes teeth-to-toe with Van Helsing in the final battle, dubbed by Richard Roxburgh as "the John Woo conclusion"); an excessively opulent operatic ball in Castle Dracula; an amazing Wolf Man transformation involving the shedding of plenty o'skin; cameos from a few unbilled monsters; oh, and the usual Sommers one-liners.

"I've matured as a filmmaker," says Sommers. "It's the most dramatic movie I've made. It's a bit Gothic, and I thought I had to capture that. But I can't help myself. I love having fun, but it's really appropriate. At the same time I think people are going to be surprised. It's more emotional than they might be expecting."

"I THINK IT'S  
ARROGANT TO  
THINK THAT  
THERE WILL BE  
A FRANCHISE."  
BOB DUCSAY



Frankenstein's monster's blue-movie career was short-lived.

Only time will tell if *Van Helsing* can swat *Spider-Man* and *Troy* in the blockbuster stakes, but the omens are good. As is the way with most franchises, Jackman has signed on for one more, along with most of the principal cast, the technical crew and the bloke who makes the tea.

"We try not to be cynical about that," muses Bob Ducsay.

"We make one picture and hope people will like that. And our goal right now is only this movie because I think it's arrogant to think that there will be more."

Arrogant to say, maybe, but one look at the marketing activity – toys, the *de rigueur* anime prequel, fast-food tie-ins, and a related television show called *Transylvania* – and you have the beginning of a well-planned franchise. Unless something unforeseen happens, *Van Helsing* will ride again. And considering the current, xXx-rated sorry state of Hollywood action heroes, that's worth a toast.

Bloody Mary, anyone?

» *Van Helsing* is released on May 6 and will be reviewed next issue.



Kate booked herself into the ancient Betty Ford Clinic.